

ISAIAH BERLIN'S ANTI-REDUCTIONISM: THE MOVE FROM SEMANTIC TO NORMATIVE PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: Against the standard reading of Isaiah Berlin's thought that drives a wedge between his early and subsequent work, this article suggests that his late normative anti-reductionism has roots in the early writings on meaning, semantics and truth. Berlin's anti-reductionist objection to logical positivists in the realm of semantics evince a sensitivity to reductionism, a recognition of the irreducibility of propositional meaning, a plea for the embeddedness of language in a temporal continuum, an anti-dualist call, and a celebration of the plural and open-ended character of propositions, all of which keep broad affinity with his mature value pluralism in ethics and politics. The unity of concerns in Berlin's work brings about two implications. First, it sheds light on the fact that Berlin's ethical and political pluralism rests on views about semantics and ontology as well. Second, it offers a basis on which to deflect some current moral realist readings of his value pluralism, offering instead a history-laden understanding of his pluralism that provides more compelling grounds to understand the relationship between the latter and liberalism in Berlin's work.

Keywords: Isaiah Berlin, pluralism, anti-reductionism, moral realism, value incommensurability, value objectivity, incomparability, liberalism, sense of reality.

Reflecting upon Berlin's intellectual career, Alan Ryan claims in reference to Berlin's earlier writings that he 'wrote several deft, acute, and accurate essays on the logical positivists' favorite pieces of analysis . . . but although these showed great philosophical talent, they did not offer any insights into what else he might do'.³ Berlin may not have known at that time where else his thoughts were leading him. In hindsight, however, one can unearth many of the fundamental features of his late value pluralism in his early writings about meaning. This does not mean, as Ryan rightly suggests, that one can understand Berlin's ethical thought if one pays exclusive attention to his early writings. It does mean, however, that his late pluralism displays more layers, depth and complexities if one interprets it from a holistic perspective that covers his entire work. For only then does it come to the surface that Berlin's

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³ Alan Ryan, 'Isaiah Berlin: Political Theory and Liberal Culture', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2 (1999), p. 16.

ethical and political pluralism rests on views about semantics and ontology as well.

Against the standard reading of Berlin's thought that drives a wedge between his early and subsequent work, this article offers a coherent interpretation of Berlin's corpus.⁴ It suggests that his late normative anti-reductionism has roots in the early works on meaning, semantics and truth, and that his ethical and political thought presupposes the same anti-reductionist drive present in his early work against logical positivism. Berlin's anti-reductionist objection to verificationism and phenomenism in the realm of semantics evolves into a normative anti-reductionist commitment embodied in the value pluralism of his later work. Moreover, the unity of concerns shared by Berlin's early and late work offers a solid basis on which to deflect some current moral realist readings of his value pluralism.

Berlin's critique of logical positivism raises complex issues that go well beyond the scope of this article. Without entering fully into the details of those debates, and certainly without attempting to adjudicate between the contending parties, I will try to convey in a general way some of the main themes of Berlin's critique of positivism, so as to demonstrate their broad affinity with his mature value pluralism and anti-reductionism in ethics.

I

Against Semantic Reductionism: Verificationism and Phenomenalism

The principle underlying the idea that 'Homer cannot coexist with Dante; nor Dante with Galileo' is present in Berlin's early writings in the form of an objection both to the conflation of categorical and hypothetical statements, and to the imposition of one excluding criterion of meaning applicable to all kinds of proposition. Underlying his later, more developed position — pertinent to the realm of ethics — that we cannot reduce Homer to Dante or find a single overriding criterion to assess the relative value of both in all contexts, one finds the same anti-reductionist viewpoint that Berlin develops in his early critical arguments against the logical positivists' endorsement of an overriding standard of meaning and a pristine form of proposition to which all

⁴ An important exception to the mainstream reading of Berlin's work that sets his early and late work apart is Jamie Reed who has forcefully argued for some of the points I raise in this article, in particular that an anti-reductionist thrust cuts across Berlin's *oeuvre*. Jamie Reed, 'From Logical Positivism to "Metaphysical Rationalism": Isaiah Berlin on the "Fallacy of Reduction"', *History of Political Thought*, 29 (1) (2008), pp. 109–31. Reed's article provides, among other things, a valuable source of reference for understanding Berlin's account of language, as well as his place with respect to an intellectual tradition. The focus of this article, instead, is to provide a better understanding of the anatomy of Berlin's ethical and political pluralism by bringing to the surface the various thematic continuities that cut across Berlin's early thought on semantics and his later political works.

others must approximate. This section briefly outlines Berlin's early anti-reductionist thought about meaning, which stands as the antechamber of his later value pluralism. The nature of the connection between these two periods is further developed in the remainder of the article.

The 'Oxford philosophy' school was the first to rise against positivism, objecting to the reduction of ordinary language to a scientific model. This strand of philosophy, which studied the function of words based on the ordinary use of language, recognized, in Berlin's words, 'the rich ambiguity of language, and difference of verbal uses, the inevitable ambivalence of words, and the dependence of inter-woven complexes of words on different angles of vision of reality'.⁵ Although Berlin remained only a fellow traveller with the Oxford philosophers, he too believed, in the early stages of his intellectual career, that positivism imposed a stern and distorting criterion upon the meaning of our propositions.

Berlin identifies two semantic problems underlying the reductionist attempts of the logical positivists. First, they impose the verificationist criterion as the sole standard of meaning to test all statements.⁶ Berlin finds this misleading and distorting, for not all meaningful propositions can be measured against the same excluding criterion. Although one cannot verify conclusively yesterday's rain, the sentence 'It rained yesterday' is not for that reason meaningless. 'The translation feels wrong', Berlin holds '[o]ne does not usually mean by the sentence "It rained yesterday" the present empirical evidence for it, not even the total sum of such evidence . . . It follows that either all propositions save those about the immediate present are meaningless; or that meaning cannot depend on conclusive verifiability.'⁷

Moreover, according to Berlin, some general propositions such as 'all S is P' are only falsifiable, and could not be verifiable given their unlimited universal character. Some positivists tried to overcome the latter challenge by treating these instances as rules or prescriptions that could be operationalized into statements measurable against the verificationist criterion. Berlin explains: 'Take a general proposition: "All men are mortal" and a particular proposition: "Socrates is a man" then "Socrates is mortal" would follow, that might be verifiable by his death.'⁸ Yet, this does not content Berlin either for, in his view, it implied that general propositions were not descriptive or empirical — a position that he finds puzzling. This operationalization, according to Berlin, distorts, rather than translates, the original statement to be verified. Hence, for

⁵ Isaiah Berlin and Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (New York, 1991), p. 152.

⁶ Isaiah Berlin, 'Verification', in *Concepts and Categories* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 12–31. Verificationism is the view that determines the meaning of assertions by means of their verification.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁸ Berlin and Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, p. 154.

Berlin, verification cannot exhaust meaning, 'imperfect verification does not mean that their meaning was somehow imperfect'.⁹ If anything, the relation is the reverse: intelligibility entails verification. The principle of verification, for Berlin, can only be applied consistently and meaningfully to just a portion of empirical knowledge and beliefs.

Berlin dismisses, as a second semantic conundrum, the positivists' endorsement to the phenomenalist analysis, the road companion of verificationism.¹⁰ The core idea underlying phenomenism is to translate 'the propositions about material objects into propositions about data of observation and introspection'.¹¹ Berlin finds this project wholly unsatisfactory. To achieve the transformation of all statements into introspective data, phenomenism requires the conversion of all categorical statements into hypothetical ones, which ultimately travesties the original propositional meaning: 'No direct translation from categoricals into hypotheticals is, as a general rule, and as our language is today ordinarily used, a correct analysis of, or substitute for them.'¹² Phenomenalism converts past categorical statements into hypothetical, empirical datum language about the present to make it amenable to the verificationist method. Berlin contends, however, that categorical propositions cannot be reduced 'to other logical forms without doing apparent violence to normal usage' as they tend 'to direct attention to . . . things and events in a way in which other kinds of expressions do not'.¹³

In Berlin's view, the phenomenalist transmutation yields an unacceptable outcome — the elimination of the difference between past and present. The conversion of categoricals about material objects into hypotheticals with a built-in intermittent and dispositional structure collapses past and present experience. Berlin finds this unsuitable, for to claim that verifiable propositions are concerned with the present always presupposes a temporal distinction. If one says that one cannot

refer to anything unless I can establish the meaning of the variables of my language in terms of what I am actually experiencing here and now . . . I become unable to refer to the past or the future or to the experiences of others . . . that way lies the kind of verification theory of meaning which has more than once been shown to lead to an extravagantly solipsist analysis of the meanings of words, ending literally in nonsense.¹⁴

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 154–5.

¹⁰ This method translates expressions describing material objects into sets of sentences about actual or possible sense experience (i.e. capable of being studied by empirical methods) by real or possible observers. Isaiah Berlin, 'Empirical Propositions and Hypothetical Statements', in *Concepts and Categories*, pp. 32–55.

¹¹ Berlin, 'Verification', p. 13.

¹² Berlin, 'Empirical Propositions and Hypothetical Statements', p. 43.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

In lieu of an incomprehensible metaphysical account of the world that the phenomenalist eagerly tries to avoid, they bequeath instead a world of experience severed from important areas of meaning.¹⁵

Berlin's objection to the phenomenalist conversion of categorical statements into sense datum hypothetical ones is part of his broader denunciation of a fallacy that in his view has pervaded the history of philosophy: the 'desire to translate many prima facie different types of proposition into a single type'.¹⁶ From Aristotle to Descartes to Russell, Berlin holds, all have favoured one type of proposition over others and have subsequently tried to convert the defective statements into the preferred kind. Usually, the chosen candidate depicts a special kind of clarity, transparency and certainty in their relation to reality absent in alternative dubious, confusing forms of expression. Philosophers have consistently picked up a type of proposition that in their view possesses an epistemological or logical virtue lacking in all the rest, and have thus attempted to carry out a wholesale translation of all other statements into the meaningful and pristine ones. According to Berlin, verificationism and phenomenism usher a kind of dualism whereby propositions are divided into 'straightforward and problem-raising, tractable and troublesome, good examples of their kind and eccentric or degenerate species requiring special remedial treatment, good and bad, sheep and goats'.¹⁷ Berlin draws attention to the central misapprehension involved, namely, 'the belief or assumption that all propositions must in principle be either translatable into, or at any rate in some way connected with, the approved type of sentences . . . or else suffer from defects which must either be explained away or palliated by special logical "treatment"'.¹⁸ In short, Berlin's writings on semantics and truth evince a sensitivity to reductionism, an acknowledgement of the irreducibility of propositional meaning, a plea for the coexistence of multiple criteria of meaning, an anti-dualist call, and a celebration of the multifarious, plural and open-ended character of meaning.

II

From Semantic to Normative Anti-Reductionism

The kernel of Berlin's thought — that not everything can be understood, measured or described in terms of something else without loss — originates in his early writings as a semantic impossibility to use verificationism as the sole standard of meaning and phenomenism as the solipsistic process of converting all experience into present sense data conveyed in hypothetical statements. Verificationism presupposes one single valid method to verify the

¹⁵ Phenomenalists mean by experience actual or possible data as are provided by observation and introspection (Berlin, 'Verification', p. 13).

¹⁶ Isaiah Berlin, 'Logical Translation', in *Concepts and Categories*, p. 57.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

meaning of all statements; phenomenism demands a translation of every proposition into one form of grammatical statement that renders them verifiable. Berlin vigorously opposes the impetus to reductionism that drives both positions. This anti-reductionist thrust burgeons into his later pluralistic ethical view and splinters into the incommensurable, plural, conflicting, historical, anti-metaphysical and comparable character of values. All of these components of his value pluralism hark back to his discussions about propositional meaning with logical positivists.

A. *Incommensurability*

If incommensurability alludes to the lack of a single standard that can accurately measure all items under consideration then meaning incommensurability stands as one of the criticisms that Berlin raises against the verificationist assessment of propositions. To be sure, Berlin does not express it in those terms, but meaning incommensurability rests behind the argument that propositions take different forms and cannot be gauged against one excluding criterion of verification. Incommensurability is in turn the most fundamental idea of Berlin's late value pluralism.

Berlin does not convey his rejection of verificationism in terms of incommensurability. Nevertheless, his account of meaning — that meaning takes various forms; that although propositions cannot all be verified or made verifiable they can yet remain intelligible; that only complementing criteria can shed light on the universe of language; and that the reduction of diverging kinds of proposition into one preferred type causes an unnecessary mutilation of valuable areas of our meaningful discourse — evokes the idea of incommensurability at each step of the argument.

In Berlin's early work, no hard and fast criterion exists to elucidate the meaning of all statements. Although not unfathomable, meaning cannot be exhausted by looking into it from the preeminent precepts of the verificationist standard. Logical positivists, in Berlin's view, overlook that more than simple verification is at stake in making sense of the entire range of our meaningful experience. Propositional meaning is richer, more complex, more elusive. 'All human beings are mortal', 'Columbus was blond', 'The book is on the table', 'If I am in the room, I see the book on the table', 'It rained yesterday' are all meaningful statements that, according to Berlin, cannot be accounted for exclusively by their degree of verifiability.

Incommensurability in ethics refers to the impossibility of arranging all values in accordance with an excluding ethical imperative that applies to all contexts and for all times. One single common ethical currency or criterion cannot play a satisfactory role in elucidating, measuring and ordering our ethical experience exhaustively. Is justice overall better than loyalty? Does equality come before freedom? Does a good Samaritan lead a better life than a highly ambitious entrepreneur? Is benevolence more valuable than integrity?

In his later work, Berlin suggests that no single standard can provide a definitive answer to these questions. Values are meaningful, and yet they are too rich, too textured, too conflictive, too many, too contradictory, too fragmented to rank them in a universal ordering and an atemporal grid. Hence, the claim that no paramount standard of evaluation could account for our meaningful experience is one that, according to Berlin, applies equally well to values as to propositions, and to ethics as well as to semantics.

Meaning, for Berlin, cannot be grasped by the reduction of language to basic units testable against the verificationist criterion. Rather, Berlin borrows from Austin and foreshadows the later Wittgenstein when he states that meaning is actually related to the adequate recognition of the appropriate use of language, the recognition of when a word rightly applies to a certain context.¹⁹ This understanding of meaning embedded in social practices and ordinary usage does not lend itself to the pulling apart of language to measure it against an exclusive criterion. 'The development of language', Berlin holds, 'is to a large extent the development of metaphors, and to attempt to discriminate between the metaphorical and non-metaphorical use of words, where metaphors are either embedded in normal speech, or a source of genuine illumination, would be absurdly pedantic, and, if pushed to extremes, unrealisable'.²⁰ This view of language as a social construction that grows out of its ordinary use would travel through Berlin's subsequent account of values understood as unavoidable lenses that spring from history and ordinary experience. One sole standard would not serve to arrange all the pieces of the set in either case.

In both cases, ethics and semantics, we lack a sole deciding standard of ordinal evaluation or common currency that could rank all values or propositions in an order of ethical preference or could make meaning transparent and uncontroversial once and for all. Neither utility (to name just one example) nor verification can play the role of a common scale of units to which values and propositions could be accurately translated. Verification cannot function as a common scale of units to which propositions can be translated. Both meaning and evaluation depend on a variety — a plurality — of different criteria. Do I draw more utility from keeping a friend or from earning one million dollars? In the absence of a common denominator to which they can be reduced, propositional meaning and meaningful ethical experience escape the ordering matrix of an exclusive standard of evaluation. Thus, the rejection to one and only one discerning parameter to measure all instances of a set is a central piece in the account of incommensurability and a continuous thought that stretches from Berlin's earlier to later writings. In both, the realm of propositions and the realm of values, as Berlin puts it in his early work 'there is no

¹⁹ Reed explains more thoroughly Berlin's conception of language. See Reed, 'From Logical Positivism to "Metaphysical Rationalism"', p. 116.

²⁰ Berlin, 'Logical Translation', p. 80.

single criterion of meaning and no single method or set of rules for testing it'.²¹

B. Plurality and Conflict

Propositions are plural, irreducible and conflicting. Against the reductionist attempt behind phenomenism, Berlin maintains that categorical statements about the past cannot be translated to hypothetical propositions about the present without loss. This call for pluralism, anti-reductionism and the acceptance of conflict and residual meaning becomes a building block in his value pluralism as well.

Everything significant, according to the phenomenalist, can be translated to one pristine and favoured grammatical structure. The hypothetical statement about the present substitutes the categorical proposition about the past. Yet there is something irredeemably wrong about this replacement, according to Berlin, for the only way in which present statements make sense is by resorting to an idea of the past. The present cannot co-opt the past without eroding its own significance, in the same way that hypothetical statements cannot monopolize the propositional grammatical structure without undermining their own meaning. Meaning rests on plural and irreducible dimensions. An all-present propositional world, holds Berlin, overwrites statements about the past and it cripples its own condition of possibility.

Propositions are plural and irreducible — and so are values. In both cases, something is inexorably lost in the translation (if it can be carried out at all). In the same way that statements are plural, diverse, various and irreducible to one single format (present, singular and hypothetical) without loss, values are plural, numerous, conflicting and cannot be reduced to one another or to a dominant end sitting atop the hierarchical structure.

If an all-present propositional world cannot stand by itself, perfect liberty cannot coexist with complete equality, pure modesty cannot persist with superlative over-achievement, and neither could make sense without the contrasting comparison of the wide range of competing values. A similar objection that Berlin raises against the reduction of categorical statements into hypothetical ones stands behind the idea that friendship cannot be translated into money, that prudential considerations cannot be turned into moral ones and that values display their full meaning against the entire arch of normativity — if the present without a past crumbles, so does the idea of freedom without the notions of oppression, equality, uniformity, repression and so on. In short, Berlin's disagreement with phenomenists grows into the related normative belief that values are conflicting and plural and cannot for that reason be translated or reduced to one another without a residue. The

²¹ *Ibid.*

worth and rationale of propositions and values depend on the ongoing contrastive force with other items of their kind.

The vision of Berlin's 'hedgehog' errs in this precise way; she fails to recognize the incommensurable, plural and conflicting character of our values. Her mistake resides in subsuming all values to a higher, harmonious, completed entity. The monist or hedgehog thinks and feels from the vantage point of an overarching structure in terms of which all other components should be understood for certainty and unity's sake. One idea, one standard, one benchmark accommodates all the constitutive parts of the system, the meaning of which turns out to be coloured and determined by their position in the organizing structure. On the contrary, the pluralist view, the 'fox's' eyes, embraces contradictory, random values and ends, connected only at times and on empirical and historical rather than on logical grounds. Values are not understood in terms of a dominant end or organizing principle.

Many thinkers to whom Berlin is attracted offer revealing insights into the demand for anti-reductionism, the persistence of the many over the one, that has troubled him from the very early stages of his career. Berlin's fascination, in Tolstoy's work, with the struggling and unsolved incarnation of both the hedgehog and the fox is a case in point. It remains within Tolstoy himself an unresolved dilemma between seeing the real life in light of the lived experience of individuals including the infinite specificities of emotions, textures, speeches, thoughts, tastes, insights and so on — a manifold of experiences that defies translation into one inclusive historical narrative — and the search for ultimate causes; the ability to understand reality in its own colour, the chaotic, at times random, at times illuminating but always innovative and spontaneous turmoil of the ordinary day-to-day reality and the belief in inexorable historical determinism. Berlin admires Tolstoy's struggle to solve the pervasive duality between the fox and the hedgehog — a duality that Tolstoy recognizes as a feature of reality and that Berlin sees as rooted in Tolstoy himself. Where others find no more than confusion, Berlin perceives a glimpse of genius and bravura in the unclear conclusion that Tolstoy provides as a solution to his dilemma — a stern determination, although ultimately unsuccessful, not to succumb to the easy way out of the hedgehog. Tolstoy incarnates a 'passionate desire for a monistic vision of life on the part of a fox bitterly intent upon seeing in the manner of a hedgehog'.²² If early in his career Berlin argues that hypothetical statements are not interchangeable with categorical ones, later he endorses the fox's view that 'Homer is not a primitive Ariosto; Shakespeare is not a rudimentary Racine'.²³ Indeed, the logical positivists and the phenomenologists are the hedgehogs of Berlin's early intellectual days.

Berlin calls into question two fallacious strategies that logical positivists, idealists or realist metaphysicians deploy to favour the simple,

²² Isaiah Berlin, *The Power of Ideas* (Princeton, NJ, 2000), p. 493.

²³ Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (Princeton, NJ, 1997), p. 38.

straightforward, good kind of proposition that reports a direct acquaintance with the world: the deflationary and inflationary approaches.²⁴ The former reduces all propositions to a selected type certified as genuine. The inflationary route takes, not surprisingly, the exact reverse path beginning with the same assumption about genuine categorical propositions but concluding instead that other kinds of statements (hypothetical, general, about the past or the future, etc.) are perfectly valid, intelligible, descriptive propositions unjustly suspected of being defective only because they are mistakenly seen as concerned with the same entities as those of the favoured propositions, when they are not: 'This doctrine maintained that hypothetical propositions, for example, were not at best partly categorical, partly not propositions at all, but that they were perfectly good propositions on their own right, but concerned with a special class of entities — "hypothetical facts", or "real possibilities", or "essences", or the like.'²⁵ Berlin claims that both strategies, however, reveal the same fallacy — a forced assimilation of all propositions to a given type — and the same equally fatal theory of truth — the correspondence model.²⁶ Berlin brushes aside the dualism underlying these two strategies — a rebuttal that later evolves into a rejection of the dichotomous organization in the domain of values and his consequent endorsement of the multifarious, complex, plural and conflicting sides of normativity.

The persistent dualism between good and bad forms of propositions that Berlin originally spots as spreading through the semantic discussions, is not unlike many of the distinctions permeating moral and political philosophy, which he later condemns. In many contemporary ethical and political theories, the dualist strategy remains intact, namely, setting up a distinction, usually a dichotomous one (the rational against the irrational self; political against moral reasons; the impartial against the partial side; the universalizable against the parochial; harmony against conflict; the reasonable *vis-à-vis* the truth, etc.) to then bring the flawed component of the pair closer to the virtuous one. The wretched are assessed solely in terms of the proximity to the ideal component of the dichotomy, and what cannot be coupled in the right manner is for that reason discredited.²⁷ Berlin's resistance to the dualist strategy

²⁴ Berlin, 'Logical Translation', pp. 56–80. I am grateful to Josh Cherniss for clarification on this point.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

²⁷ Berlin's famous distinction between positive and negative freedom points more to a continuum than to a dichotomy. Berlin asserts that '[t]he freedom which consists in being one's own master, and the freedom which consists in not being prevented from choosing as I do by other men, may [...] seem concepts at no great logical distance from each other — no more than the negative and positive ways of saying much the same thing'. He hastens to add that it is historically that the positive and negative notions of freedom have developed in divergent directions. Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', pp. 131–2.

of the positivist concludes in a fragmentation of values that ushers a form of politics that cannot rest consistently on a dichotomous normative ordering.

C. *Anti-Metaphysical and Historical View*

The empirical, historical and anti-metaphysical presuppositions of Berlin's value pluralism, like many other major features of his ethical stance, date back to his writings against positivism. Berlin's turning his back on the sense data and atomist fact-reductionism that vouches for the ultimate constituents of reality (defended by A.J. Ayer and Bertrand Russell respectively) eventually metamorphoses into an opposition to the view that we can find moral values as ultimate components in the normative realm that are awaiting discovery and impinge upon the person as a passive moral agent. By the time he turns towards the study of ethics and politics, this prevalent credence against the ultimate constituents view transmutes into a sort of Kantianism that claims that we see and understand the world through the lenses of the 'human semblance', a historical portrait of human agency. He also comes to believe that rational moral argumentation is not the prerogative of the moral realist.

According to Berlin, logical positivists fall into a version of the 'Ionian fallacy' when trying to find the ultimate constituents of reality 'and since the world consists of these basic ingredients, language cannot do better than mirror them — reproduce the "structure of reality"'.²⁸ Positivists believe also that the propositions that describe the ultimate features of the world — sense data or atomic facts — enjoy *ipso facto* a privileged status, a stance of which Berlin also disapproves: '[t]his is indeed a metaphysic with a vengeance, without any of the virtues of the more interesting metaphysical systems'.²⁹ The correspondence theory of meaning, the theory of truth that goes hand in hand with this ontological view, presupposes a symmetrical correlation between words of pristine propositions and the final components of reality. The rejection of what Berlin construes as a strange ontology stretches into the later writings about morality and politics when he argues that all that we can know and make claims about lies in our experience. For him, there is no room in the universe for 'queer' moral entities — 'For the only thing which convinces in matters not capable of proof' he argues 'is a direct appeal to experience, a description of what we think right or true which varies with what our audience has itself in some sense, however inarticulately, known or felt'.³⁰ Historical awareness is all that there is and all that words can express.

In tune with his early call against the 'ultimate constituents' view and the idea that language serves the purpose of reproducing the deep structure of

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

³⁰ Isaiah Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought* (Princeton, NJ, 2006), p. 13. The idea of 'queer moral entities' can be found in J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York, 1977), pp. 38–42.

reality, Berlin develops an idea of objectivity that is more the result of a historical and normative constructivism than an upshot of the intrinsic nature of values. 'Out of the timber so crooked as that from which man is made nothing entirely straight can be built' — Berlin reminds us, quoting Kant in support of the idea that no hard and fast universal moral criterion could be drawn out from human nature.³¹ Berlin nonetheless does extract something 'straight' and permanent from the crooked timber of humanity. After taking the cultural pulse of human action across the ages, Berlin concludes that we can outline a semi-permanent depiction of what it means to be a person — what he calls the human semblance — that enables rational argumentation among different views. Although open, undecided and loose, this conception is composed of multiple and permanent concepts and categories that have sprung from and organized human experience. Because of its enduring nature, this cluster of categories makes rational argumentation possible, providing a common formal condition from which to assess questions of value. Because of its open nature, it lays the basis for anti-reductionism and lends support to pluralism in the normative domain.

Ethical argumentation is not about a random clash of fancy preferences but, on the contrary, involves a process of rational, well-grounded discussion. Berlin's pluralism is not about competing tastes and preferences, all at the same level, each with its own value attached, which cannot be compared to one another. Moral matters can be rationally assessed, moral judgments can be true or false, discussion about values and forms of life is imperative and inescapable, and as the result of all of these some ultimate ends can be integrated with one another if only temporarily. Insofar as men and women are endowed with imagination, they can conceive as meaningful a value system different from theirs. They can see other human beings engaging in different practices, make sense of those values, understand and communicate them because they share in the experience of being a person. Fuelled by opposing comprehensive views, persons disagree, object, antagonize and go to war; and yet, they can recognize the others' forms of life as a human pursuit. 'That is why pluralism is not relativism — the multiple values are objective, part of the *essence of humanity* rather than arbitrary creations of men's subjective fancies.'³²

Value objectivity remains possible within his pluralist outlook because the nature of values and the pursuit of them is 'part of what it is to be a human being, and this is an objective given . . . there are certain values, and only those values, which men, while remaining men, can pursue'.³³ Distinctively human values are multiple and diverse but not infinite, they elicit an awareness of what it means to lead a human life absent in animals or inanimate things, and

³¹ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, p. 48.

³² Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, p. 12, italics added.

³³ *Ibid.*

bring in the possibility of human understanding even under the arch of competing or antagonistic ways of life. 'Objectivity of moral judgment seems to depend on (almost to consist in) the degree of constancy in human responses', Berlin argues, 'a minimum of common moral ground — interrelated concepts and categories — is intrinsic to human communication'.³⁴

Hence, the realm of value is the realm defined by our humanity, a conceptual scheme that we cannot help but recognize if we are to act in accordance with the idea of a person as we conceive it today; we understand the limits of our humanity through the web of these categories. This categorial framework is a central and less variant feature of our historical experience that makes communication possible; widespread and stable ways in which we think, decide, perceive and judge.³⁵ These concepts and categories are then unavoidable: without them we would lack the equipment to understand ourselves. Because outside them we cannot grasp the meaning of human actions, they are binding and imposing; and because of that they turn out to be semi-permanent or considerably more stable than other features of the empirical world, thus providing an objective basis for argumentation among persons.

Berlin's Kantianism lies in his continuous effort to make us aware of the most ingrained and intimate categories through which we comprehend our lives. Unlike Kant, however, Berlin sees these categories as historical rather than *a priori*. Indeed, when it comes to explaining the origin of these categories, Berlin is closer to Durkheim than to Kant.³⁶ Berlin, like Durkheim, accepts the social origin of the normative concepts — 'the solid frames that enclose all thought . . . the armature of intelligence' as Durkheim calls them — and rejects aprioristic arguments about their existence.³⁷ Moreover, they both sustain the view that if at any given moment human beings do not share in these categories, any communicative agreement would break down.³⁸ The objectivity that Berlin invokes relates to the terrain of values historically created by persons' actions and thoughts that enable and limit our reciprocal interactions. For the early Berlin, propositional truth, *pace* logical positivism, is not reached simply by establishing a relationship between language and

³⁴ Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (London and New York, 1969), p. xxxii.

³⁵ Isaiah Berlin, 'Does Political Theory Still Exist?', in *Concepts and Categories*, p. 164.

³⁶ The references and comparisons with Durkheim do not assume any actual influence of the French sociologist on Berlin's thought.

³⁷ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford and New York, 2001), p. 11. Durkheim's argument, unlike Berlin's, is about the social origin of religious representations.

³⁸ Durkheim states that if 'men did not agree on these essential ideas, if they had no homogeneous concept of time, space, causality, number, and so on, then any agreement between minds, and therefore all common life, would become impossible'. *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

reality; for the late Berlin, our entire interaction with the world remains mediated by our normative and social constitution.

If Kant makes Berlin run afoul of the idea that truth hinges on the ultimate constituents of reality, Vico brings the historical flux into Berlin's account of objectivity. Vico holds that there is a single, continuous consciousness which belongs to all,

and that we understand the past of the human race as a man understands his own individual past, by a kind of cultural memory, by an awareness more or less dim, but capable of being stimulated by the use of imagination and the discovery of concrete evidence, of the condition from which we emerged, stretching into the most distant past.³⁹

For Vico too, according to Berlin, 'there is a common human nature, otherwise men in one age could not understand the literature or the art of another, or, above all, its laws'.⁴⁰ Berlin reformulates this idea by stating that the relatively constant complex of concepts and categories that outlines our human portrait functions as a kind of collective memory that stretches into the past and provides the conditions for some empathetic recognition of others' experiences in different places and time.⁴¹

Berlin's Kantianism — the belief in the internal constitution of values that mediates between our experience and the world — harks back to his rejection of logical positivism, its ontological view about ultimate constituents of the world, and a correlative correspondence theory of truth that establishes that propositions must properly reflect the exact anatomy of reality. Vico, on the other hand, informs Berlin's account of objectivity, which springs from an understanding that persons have historically shared the same categorial fabric: 'there must be common language, common communication and, to some degree, common values, otherwise there will be no intelligibility between human beings. A human being who cannot understand what any other human being says is scarcely a human being; he is pronounced abnormal'.⁴² The early cry against the logical positivists' account of truth and their search for the ultimate constituents of the world as either sense-datum experience or atomic facts resonates later on with Berlin's anti-metaphysical and historical constitution of the human mind shaped by the normative lenses through which we approach our surroundings. For in both his early and subsequent writings, Berlin waves aside the relevance of the ultimate components of our existence — as either sense experience or objective facts of the world — and with

³⁹ Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, p. 218.

⁴⁰ Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, p. 8.

⁴¹ Vico's deepest belief, says Berlin, 'was that what men have made, other men can understand . . . Because our ancestors were men, Vico supposes that they knew, as we know, what it is to love and hate, hope and fear, to want, to pray, to fight, to betray, to oppress, to be oppressed, to revolt'. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, pp. 60, 61.

⁴² Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (Princeton, NJ, 1999), p. 145.

it goes Berlin's early and late dismissal of the correspondence account of truth as the theory of meaning that accompanies that ontological structure of reality. 'Logical perfection', for Berlin,

should be exposed as stemming from a false theory of meaning, accompanied by its equally counterfeit metaphysical counterpart — a view of the universe as possessing an 'ultimate structure', as being constructed out of this or that collection or combination of bits and pieces of 'ultimate stuff' which the 'language' is constructed to reproduce.⁴³

This opposition to this metaphysical view would be a piece of his ethical view.

Is Berlin a moral realist?

If Berlin's account of ethical objectivity stems so decisively from a description of the person that is both historically driven and ingrained in our perception of the world, could we meaningfully claim that he is a moral realist? Encouraged by Berlin's defence of truth in ethical discourse many scholars have claimed that he holds some kind of moral realism. Charles Taylor and Thomas Nagel emphasize the enduring, commanding, non-contingent aspect of Berlin's account of values. Taylor holds that Berlin 'stated the conflict of goods as though it were *written into the goods themselves*'.⁴⁴ He also attaches some kind of moral realism to Berlin since he views 'these goods as in some way imposing themselves, as binding on me, or making a claim on me. Otherwise the conflict could be easily set aside. Or at least, the conflict would turn out to be one in me, something that I could straighten out if I could just achieve some harmony in my goals'.⁴⁵ Nagel, on the other hand, argues that values are not just the attitudes of groups or individuals — they are real values that provide reasons for actions. Nagel states that, for Berlin, the realm of value cannot be reduced to the psychological sphere, and that 'in many cases values can conflict *noncontingently or essentially*'.⁴⁶ Likewise, for both John Gray and George Crowder, Berlin's thesis of incommensurability of values is part of a realist meta-ethical position.⁴⁷

⁴³ Berlin, 'Logical Translation', p. 80. Heralding L. Wittgenstein's account of language in *Philosophical Investigations*, Berlin holds that 'words mean, not by pinning down bits of reality, but by having a recognised use, i.e. when their users know how and in what situations to use them in order to communicate whatever they may wish to communicate; and for this there are no exhaustive formal rules'. Berlin, 'Logical Translation', pp. 79–80.

⁴⁴ Mark Lilla *et al.*, *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin* (New York, 2001), p. 117, italics added.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 106, italics added.

⁴⁷ George Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism, Political Theory and Contemporary Politics* (London, 2002), p. 3; John Gray, 'Agonistic Liberalism', *Social Philoso-*

The quotes by Taylor and Nagel above highlight the independence of the logic of values — their absolute and imposing character, their autonomy from the logic of facts, and their incontestable reality — which puts Berlin in a realistic suit that may not fit him properly. There is a reality of values, according to this interpretation, that works mind-independently, and acts upon us unbendingly. This account left us groping regarding the origin of these values and thus can hardly explain why values operate in the way they do. Those claims dwell on the incoherence of the idea that, if properly understood and accommodated, all rational ends can be fully satisfied. Yet these explanations, as they stand, leave unclear where these quasi-permanent values come from; they put Berlin in the camp of an objective realism that leaves no room for human intervention in the construction of that objectivity and it overlooks the link between these values (or categories) and his idea of human semblance. While they shed helpful light on the relationship between values among themselves, they say little about the grounds for the imposing character of these values or the rationale for their existence. Since Berlin distrusts so wholeheartedly any form of metaphysical or ontological overindulgence and he clings so resolutely to ordinary experience as the only source of moral awareness, it turns out to be important to come to terms with the source of these values and not only with their imperative, non-contingent binding force. Berlin shrugs off the ontological account that posits ultimate constituents of reality. Yet, without any further elaboration, these statements insinuate that values are entities hanging somewhere in the universe ready to act upon persons — a stance that Berlin deserts after his early works.

Taylor acknowledges that the work of Bernard Williams is a difficult case to class as, in his view, he is neither a realist nor a non-realist thinker. The argument that follows intends to support the idea that we can claim at least that much about Berlin's ethical thought.⁴⁸ Indeed, his ethics grows out of the recognition of Hume's legacy — that is, that ethical statements are neither subjective nor objective, that value statements are *sui generis*, and that the subjective-objective distinction does not apply to them properly.⁴⁹ Thus, Berlin states that 'normative statements fail to be subjective not in the sense that they might have been objective, but in the sense that they are wholly

phy and Policy, 12 (1) (1995), p. 118; John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (Princeton, NJ, 1996), p. 72; John Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism* (New York, 2000), p. 6. Iain Mackenzie also argues that one of the arguments that Berlin purportedly deploys in defence of value-pluralism is the endorsement of the existence of a priori moral categories, which involves a sort of moral realism. (Iain Mackenzie, 'Berlin's Defence of Value-Pluralism: Clarifications and Criticisms', *Contemporary Politics*, 5 (4) (1999), esp. pp. 329–33.) Yet, Mackenzie argues that 'there are strong tendencies within Berlin's work towards meta-ethical non-realism, despite his claims to the contrary', *ibid.*, p. 333.

⁴⁸ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA, 1989), p. 59.

⁴⁹ Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, pp. 260–5.

different from the kind of statements (or beliefs or thoughts) to which the distinction between subjective and objective applies'.⁵⁰

Realism in ethics has been defined in many ways. Robert Arrington's realism holds that moral claims describe moral facts and as such they have truth values depending on whether they accurately depict the moral facts or not.⁵¹ Michael Smith claims that moral realism is the metaphysical view that moral facts exist, the psychological part of which is cognitivism, that is, 'the view that moral judgments express our beliefs about what these moral facts are, and that we can come to discover what these facts are by engaging in moral argument and reflection'.⁵² Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, alternatively, proposes a more extensive definition that denotes more and connotes less: the claims in question are literally true or false (cognitivism), and some of them are literally true (non-error theory).⁵³ Under the latter, more flexible criterion there are only two ways to be an anti-realist: to be a non-cognitivist or to hold that the claims of the disputed class, despite carrying truth-values, are none of them true. Since Berlin endorses both the view that moral claims carry truth-values and that some of them are true, we should examine why it is uninformative to call him a moral realist.

The usual terms deployed in the discussion of moral realism are almost alien to Berlin's writings. He never argues, for instance, that moral language expresses moral beliefs and thus reports facts. Nor does he endorse a robustly metaphysical realism that postulates the existence of mind-independent moral facts. Yet he does maintain that moral claims are truth-assessable and thus enlists a cognitivist position. He argues that in holding moral beliefs and engaging in moral argument we seek evidence for our opinions. We can alter other people's attitudes and behaviour through rational moral argument and not, as the non-cognitivist would hold, because moral claims express emotions (emotivism) or because they serve as universalizable commands (prescriptivism). Not only does Berlin treat moral claims as assertions that carry truth-values but he also holds that some of them have the truth-value true. Hence, unlike some anti-realists, who embrace an 'error theory' conceding that moral claims have truth-values while denying that any of them are true, Berlin holds a cognitivist stance and asserts that some of the moral claims are true.⁵⁴

The first pitfall of the moral realist version of Berlin's pluralism is that it by-passes the *sui generis* and historical account of objectivity at the heart of his ethical theory, which differs sharply from the objectivity that moral

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

⁵¹ Robert L. Arrington, *Rationalism, Realism, and Relativism* (Ithaca, 1989), p. 120.

⁵² Michael Smith, 'Realism', in *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer (Oxford and Cambridge, MA, 1991), p. 34.

⁵³ Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca, NY, 1988), p. 5.

⁵⁴ Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, pp. 35–49.

realists and realists about truth usually advocate. Second, the moral realist reading entails an inattention to history and the historical construction of reality pervasive in Berlin's work. Berlin's idea that values are 'intrinsically incoherent' that if 'some of these values prove to be incompatible, they cannot — conceptually cannot — coalesce' is borrowed indeed from Vico's profoundly historical understanding of cultures each with its own ideals, ends and standards, most of them at variance with each other.⁵⁵ The third weakness lies in overlooking the kind of practical reason at stake in Berlin's pluralism. Berlin's ethical theory 'lies at the heart of a truly historical study', which involves the use of imaginative insight, what he calls the 'sense of reality', without which 'the bones of the past remain dry and lifeless'.⁵⁶ I will address each of these three problems in turn.

Berlin argues that values do not properly *act* upon us, as the realist reading goes, but *constitute* us. As self-interpretative beings, we cannot conceive of ourselves and our circumstances outside our value-clad minds. We do not know what it means to live in an amorphous world stripped of these organizing notions that filter our vision and understanding. We envision our lives as being fair, unjust, courageous, brute, magnanimous, benevolent, virtuous, mean, perverse, generous, gracious, brave, bald, intrepid, innovative, resentful and so on — multifarious categories that percolate from our historical experience. For Berlin, what we normatively know depends thoroughly on the worldview that organizes our practical reasoning. There is no 'out there despite what we think', no 'mind-independent reality'. Thus, in recognition of the aftermath of Romanticism, Berlin maintains: 'This seems to me to have led to something like the melting away of the very notion of objective truth, at least in the normative sphere.'⁵⁷

Berlin believes that our normative order is circumscribed by the boundaries of meaning resulting from an unremittingly long historical process that yields a certain conception of the person. Berlin's objectivity refers not to the normative order of things — values do not come arranged in a certain way — but to the mind-dependent categories through which we approach our lives. Objectivity is not an attribute of the world but of the set of values through which we arrange the world. Objectivity is not a built-in feature of the outside realm but an ingrained arrangement of our minds, a feature that conditions and facilitates claiming something about the world *we* experience, the world as it is for us. It is precisely the realist objectivity (that the world is organized in a certain way no matter what we think about it) that Berlin's mind-dependence approach to the normative structure (that we get to know the world filtered by the horizon of the human semblance) emasculates. Berlin's pluralism of value entails a mind-dependency in our relation to the world that undermines and

⁵⁵ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, p. 65.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

collides with the conception of objectivity usually endorsed by moral realists. Instead, Berlin supports a non-realist kind of objectivity that rejects the metaphysical independence of values while buttressing the objectivity of moral discourse.⁵⁸ 'If Hume is right', Berlin holds,

at any rate in maintaining that normative statements cannot be describing entities called values which exist in the world, which have independent being in the sense in which things or events or persons can be said to do — because the notion of such objective values proved, upon examination, to be unintelligible — then he is in effect implying (though he never himself saw this clearly enough) that ethical statements are in principle different in the way they are used from logical or descriptive statements, and the distinction between subjective and objective may turn out to not apply to them at all.⁵⁹

Likewise, the moral realist reading deflates the importance of history in Berlin's accounts of values. Berlin salutes many aspects of Vico's work — the genealogical understanding, the role of imagination, insight, empathy and sympathy, the futility of compressing ways of thinking into one evolving pattern, the view that events are different from actions, that history, because we make it, is less opaque than the natural world, and that knowledge of ourselves (how we think, act, communicate, judge, suffer, strive, enjoy, create, imagine) is not only different from but also more fundamental than any other kind of knowledge.⁶⁰ Hence, for Berlin, political normative thinking is not a discussion about and among values; it is an examination of values embedded in social practices, institutions, rules and expectations. Despite truth playing some role in Berlin's justification of normative beliefs, their assessment remains tentative and uncommitted in virtue of their relation to a political reality from which they cannot disengage. Bernard Williams puts this idea thus:

no abstract or analytical point exists out of all connection with historical, personal, thought: that every thought belongs, not just somewhere, but to someone, and is at home in a context of other thoughts, a context which is not purely formally prescribed. Thoughts are present to Berlin not just, or primarily, as systematic possibilities, but as historically and psychologically actual, and as something to be known and understood in these concrete terms.⁶¹

⁵⁸ For a defence and explanation of this form of non-realism, see Michael Rosen, 'Must We Return to Moral Realism?', *Inquiry*, 34 (1991), p. 189. Indeed, Rosen argues that Charles Taylor is closer to non-realism than he would be willing to admit, which aligns with my point that Taylor's realist reading of Berlin may not be as pertinent as he claims.

⁵⁹ Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, p. 263.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 216–22.

⁶¹ Bernard Williams, 'Introduction', in Isaiah Berlin, *Concepts and Categories*, p. xii.

The source of values, for Berlin, are persons themselves — persons as we have come to see them through historical time.⁶² Here, once again, Berlin's Kantianism surfaces with all its intensity. His description of Kant's important dictum — that a value is made a value 'by human choice and not by some intrinsic quality in itself, out there' and that '[v]alues are not stars in some moral heaven, they are internal, they are what human beings freely choose to live for, to fight for, to die for' — faithfully reflects his own position as well.⁶³ Value-concepts are intertwined with our historical self-perception and comprehension of the world we inhabit, and they evolve along with our historical development. The moral realist reading of Berlin's pluralistic ethics sidelines the fact that, for him, truth is historically and socially embedded, that values are historical creations, and that the objectivity that facilitates rational moral argumentation percolates from a relentless historical understanding of our most ingrained human features. That values are historical does not impugn their compelling and imposing character — an aspect of values in Berlin's thought that is usually mentioned as proof of his realism. The importance of values in the conduct of life, Berlin claims, 'is not diminished or altered by a clearer realisation of the confusion about their logical status. They remain as important or unimportant as before, but are neither subjective nor objective: they are *sui generis*, to be assessed by methods appropriate to them'.⁶⁴

The realist account of Berlin's ethical theory overlooks, finally, the kind of rationality that he embraces as the proper mode of practical reasoning. There is no theory for tea-tasting, Berlin claims.⁶⁵ Few other words in his writings evoke so pungently what is involved in the indefinable capacity that he calls the 'sense of reality'. This faculty plays a pivotal role in Berlin's thought, for it alone, granted a generic human character, allows delving into the past and across cultures to carry on a rational assessment of values without being

⁶² Charles Larmore holds, on the contrary, that Berlin has always held on to the conviction, 'affirmed in the Agnelli Prize speech, that "there is a world of objective values", ends and ideals whose worth we discover, not create' (Charles Larmore, 'Review: *The Sense of Reality*', *Boston Review*, December–January, 1997–8). Yet Berlin never states there or anywhere else that values are discovered. Indeed, in reference to the service rendered by romanticism, Berlin alludes in particular to 'the doctrine that forms its heart, namely, that *morality is moulded by the will and that ends are created, not discovered*' (Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, p. 237, emphasis added). Berlin conceives of this as a benefit rather than as something to condone or abhor. He applauds the legacy that Schiller, Goethe, Humboldt, Herder, Vico and others bequeath to the first half of the nineteenth century, that is, 'the notion that the ends of morals and politics are not discovered but invented' and that the laws that human beings follow 'are a way of being and acting, and not objective, independent entities inspectable in isolation, by themselves' (Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, pp. 176–7).

⁶³ Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, pp. 72–3.

⁶⁴ Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, pp. 264–5.

⁶⁵ Isaiah Berlin, *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History* (New York, 1997), p. 50.

swayed by the commands of formal, empirical or universalizable thinking. This skill is a form of practical reasoning that puts Berlin apart from both relativism and realism.

The practical reasoning that can wrestle with the open character of our experience and yet guide our intuitions is a sense of reality — a historical sense that eludes any perpetual rule-thinking about that reality that can never be left too far behind. The sense of reality is an inscrutable capacity — not because it is lofty, mysterious or obscure but for the opposite reason, that it penetrates too deeply in our experience. At times, Berlin calls it ‘judgment’ and fleshes it out as the empirical knack of weaving together independent concepts and general presuppositions.⁶⁶ At others, he describes it as ‘our capacity for understanding the habits of thought and action that are embodied in human attitudes and behaviour . . . what is called knowledge of life’.⁶⁷ Influenced by Vico and Weber, Berlin claims that the sense of reality (Vico’s *fantasia* and Weber’s *Verstehen*) — which in all cases I understand as an unfathomable amalgam of intuition, comprehension, imagination, remembrance, foresight, empathy, reciprocal expectations and so on — is the proper way of making human life intelligible, and could never be replaced by, or conflated with, deductive or inductive methods.

Berlin finds a disposition towards this capacity in a wide variety of thinkers, all of whom display a historical sense, and mistrust the formal and abstract categories of science as the only tool to dig in the meaningful structure of human life. Thus, in discussing Joseph de Maistre’s work and its resemblance to Tolstoy’s, Berlin finds in common a way of thinking that he expounds as ‘a sense of what fits with what, of what cannot exist with what; and it goes by many names: insight, wisdom, practical genius, a sense of the past, an understanding of life and of human character’.⁶⁸ Despite their differences, de Maistre and Tolstoy both reject the totalizing abstract narrative and the ‘iron laws’ of sciences to explain the relation of things, events, actions and the texture of human life. Both, consequently, champion some kind of Aristotelian practical wisdom, a natural knowledge that serves to navigate the difficult waters that separate the multitude from the unique and the embracing structure that organizes it. The sense of history is that elusive virtue that can interpret the ‘flow of reality’. ‘This inexpressible sense of cosmic orientation’, says Berlin ‘is the “sense of reality”, the “knowledge” of how to live’.⁶⁹ The open character of this account of practical reasoning, its attachment to context and circumstances, and its malleable and evolving nature sit at odds with moral realism that purportedly requires a sharper faculty that discerns

⁶⁶ Isaiah Berlin, ‘The Concept of Scientific History’, in *Concepts and Categories*, p. 116.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁶⁸ Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, p. 485.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 489.

right from wrong decisively and permanently. If, as the realist claims, there is a mind-independent moral reality, moral truths should be accessible to human knowledge as a form of discovery.⁷⁰ Yet, this differs from Berlin's account of how we get to know how to lead a good life.

The sense of history helps us to navigate the unsettled waters of experience that are too permanent, too stable, too obvious, too encompassing as well as those that are too ephemeral, too particular, too unique. The sense of history is an indefinable perception, an imaginative insight capable of delving into and communicating a form of life. It displays the virtue of preserving this knowledge in its own right; its thoughts and language are its own and defies any attempt of translation and assimilation into other forms of expression and understanding. It avoids the reductionist fallacy that Berlin denounces from the early stages of his writings: 'There is no substitute for a sense of reality.'⁷¹ Yet, 'how we perform such acts of identification and attribution it is almost impossible to say'.⁷² The sense of reality, the practical judgment and insight that intervenes in knowing our friends, in perceiving that which is ungraspable by words, in being aware of the invisible, in inspiring acts of art is, like the dimensions of reality that it comprehends, indefinable. 'To try to analyse and clearly describe what goes on when we understand in this sense is impossible.'⁷³

In short, Berlin's pluralism does not align properly with moral realism because of the empirical, historical, mind-dependent and open-ended character of his accounts of objectivity and practical reasoning — all features that in an inchoate form lie at the heart of Berlin's opposition to the new metaphysics ushered in by the strategies of the logical positivists. Hence, even if we could technically fit Berlin's thought under some definition of realism, we would end up with an uninteresting case of a moral realist and with an interpretation of Berlin's ethical view that fails to recognize the objections to theoretical issues he raised from the beginning of his work.

D. Incompleteness

Postulating the existence of a privileged kind of proposition that purportedly maintains a direct relation to the world serves, according to Berlin, another purpose which he finds unpalatable and spurious in both his early and late work. 'Plainly', he states, 'one of the most powerful of philosophical stimuli

⁷⁰ Rosen, 'Must We Return to Moral Realism?', pp. 189–90. Rosen argues that, for Taylor, 'moral reasoning contains, ultimately, no criteria beyond what we can come to accept as the best interpretation of our lived experience' and that the debate about such interpretation may be open-ended (*ibid.*). This, according to Rosen, highlights the non-realist dimension of Taylor's thought. The same can be said about Berlin's.

⁷¹ Berlin, *The Sense of Reality*, p. 35.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

is the search for security.⁷⁴ This pursuit of security leads to the fatal consequence of believing ‘that there must be a group of propositions, tested and found indestructible, which forms the minimum gold reserve without which intellectual currency cannot be exchanged’.⁷⁵ Berlin’s view now and then is the obverse — that both meaning and ethical experience alike remain always open and undecided and cannot be caged into one grammatical structure or social form; and that some degree of uncertainty is thus ineluctable in our forms of expression and the perception of ourselves and our surroundings. Thus, the resistance to settle with propositions that could be ‘dry, dull, [and] uninformative’ for the sake of ‘unassailable certainty’ transmutes into a refusal to accept sealed and utopian systems of thought that purportedly solve value conflicts in favour of moral and political clarity and certainty.⁷⁶ Instead, Berlin encourages us not to sever normative thought from the social fabric where it develops — an invitation to uncertainty, under-determination and incompleteness in the realm of value.

Berlin denies the possibility that all ethical questions have one and only one correct answer, that there is a path towards attaining one single truth and that all ethical truths must be compatible with each other — he simply distrusts the search for universal certainty in the form of a self-contained system of thought. Politically and morally, he objects to the possibility of an ‘ideal society’ where all great values can be realized simultaneously. No theoretical system can accommodate once and for all, in a fixed-hierarchical way, political, aesthetic and religious values. ‘One of the intellectual phenomena which made the greatest impact on me’, he says echoing his early thought against logical positivists, ‘was the universal search by philosophers for absolute certainty, for answers which could not be doubted, for total intellectual security. This from the very beginning appeared to me to be an illusory quest.’⁷⁷

Instead, Berlin turns to history (via the history of ideas) to conclude that the expression of human life will unavoidably take many forms, that humans organize their societies differently, that persons seek a wide variety of values and find expression in a wide range of them at different times, and that these manifestations are vital expressions of authenticity. Berlin stands against the possibility of

final objective answers to normative questions, truths that can be demonstrated or directly intuited, that it is in principle possible to discover a harmonious pattern in which all values are reconciled, and that it is towards this unique goal that we must make; that we can uncover some single central

⁷⁴ Berlin, ‘Logical Translation’, p. 77.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁷⁷ Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, p. 4.

principle that shapes this vision, a principle which, once found, will govern our lives.⁷⁸

At any given point in time, competing models, paradigms or worldviews integrate the web of categories differently and thus interpret the world in their own way. The existence of these models is, like the categories to which they are linked, unavoidable — for all description as well as explanation involves some model in terms of which the describing and explaining is done.⁷⁹ Thus, dissent lingers as long as the categories are juggled in various ways by distinct higher-order views of the world. While these competing models — each with its internal consistency and explanatory force — set the tone for disagreement, the stable and widespread categories provide the common ground for the rational assessment of the competing worldviews. For this reason, Berlin claims both that disagreement furnishes the fabric of the world and that rational evaluation of this disagreement is possible — the categories provide a sufficiently continuous ground to constitute a common world shared among those who advance competing interpretations of their lives.

The permanence of endless contestation derives from the fact that at any given time these comprehensive views accommodate only a limited arrangement of values. None of them provide a full description of human experience without loss of meaning, or embrace simultaneously in a consistent way the entire web of categories that define us as persons. Achieving final agreement on ultimate ends remains impossible not at the level of political theory (indeed, the unavoidability of political theory proves that accommodation of values is always provisional), but as a burden upon any consistent outlook that presupposes the conception of the person as we understand it today. The possibility of some normative arrangement is not ruled out by Berlin as he even concedes the prospect of some sort of value accommodation.⁸⁰ Rather, his most decisive point is that however we interpret values we cannot provide a full description of human experience, and this failing on the part of our worldviews invites endless contestation.

Any given framework remains just that — one possible outlook that makes sense of our lives — if only because a comprehensive viewpoint is never truly comprehensive. To the extent that justified beliefs depend on the normative understanding of the world and the latter, in turn, on the substantive and always varying conceptual and categorial scheme that defines us as human beings, the attainment of truth is always provisional and historical. That is why Berlin insists on the ineluctability of political philosophy, as any comprehensive view implies an attitude committed to endless challenge because it always yields an incomplete description of the conception of the person and the world. Any model or paradigm ‘mechanistic, organic, aesthetic, logical,

⁷⁸ Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, pp. lv–lvi.

⁷⁹ Isaiah Berlin, ‘The Purpose of Philosophy’, in *Concepts and Categories*, p. 10.

⁸⁰ Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, p. 12.

mystical, shaped by the strongest influence of the day — religious, scientific, metaphysical or artistic’ — always entails a loss.⁸¹ It follows from this that it is inconsistent to advance a systematic, complete political theory: ‘the need to choose, to sacrifice some ultimate values to others, turns out to be a permanent characteristic of the human predicament’.⁸²

Berlin’s early scepticism about semantic certainty transmutes into a related dismissal of ethical systems that boast value completeness:

no doctrine that has at its heart a monistic conception of the true and the good and the beautiful, or a teleology according to which everything conspires towards a final harmonious resolution — an ultimate order in which all the apparent confusions and imperfections of the life of the world will be resolved — no doctrine of this kind can allow variety as an independent value to be pursued for its own sake; for variety entails the possibility of the conflict of values, of some irreducible incompatibility between the ideals, or, indeed, the immediate aims, of fully realised, equally virtuous men.⁸³

Incompleteness and uncertainty are features that cut across Berlin’s entire work. In the realms of meaning and ethics, according to him, the past, the future and the absent are unavoidable elements that filter into the system and inject uncertainty and incompleteness to the whole. Berlin’s position that claiming something meaningful, or true or false or even interesting about human values and the world involves a historical comparison, an assessment and awareness of our past and present experiences, replicates the early observation against logical positivists that in order to describe something one needs necessarily to call in what is absent (past or present) and therefore theoretically dubitable:

To say anything significantly about the world we must bring in something other than immediate experience . . . namely the past and the future, and absent objects, and other persons, and unrealised possibilities, and general and hypothetical judgements, and so forth. And if these, because we cannot certify them as certain, are cut away, in the end literally nothing will be left.⁸⁴

‘Logical perfection’ aims at security and completeness. The idea of ameliorating either meaning or experience by translating it to a better instance of its kind is, according to Berlin, a torturing process based on a logical or historical or normative fallacy that leads necessarily to a distorted account of meaning, morality or politics. ‘We cannot speak without incurring some risk, at least in theory’, he states in reference to the positivist task ‘the only way of being absolutely safe is to say absolutely nothing; this is the goal towards which the

⁸¹ Berlin, ‘Does Political Theory Still Exist?’, p. 154.

⁸² Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, p. li.

⁸³ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, p. 57.

⁸⁴ Berlin, ‘Logical Translation’, p. 78.

search for “fundamental” propositions asymptotically tends’.⁸⁵ For Berlin, completeness and absolute certainty come with a high price in both the realms of meaning and ethics.

E. Incomparability

The notion of incomparability is a close relative to that of incommensurability, and yet it does not play a role either in Berlin’s semantics or ethics. Indeed, in both areas the cry for incommensurability is also a cry for comparability. The resistance to reductionism brings in the idea that different statements need each other — they may be irreducible and incommensurable but they are comparable. We make sense of present statements because we compare them with past propositions. Meaning is a universe of interrelated differences that entail comparisons among its constitutive elements. A similar idea traverses Berlin’s ethical thought when he suggests that practical reason works on the grounds of the comparisons among incommensurables.

Without explicitly saying so, Berlin rejects the idea of incomparability in both the realms of value and semantics. Unlike the idea of incommensurability, which he openly endorses, one has to put statements side by side to realize that the notion of comparability is equally seminal in his work. In his ethical writings, the silenced idea of comparability looms large when Berlin analyses the boundaries of meaningful communication. Berlin believes that ethical communication faces limits — the limits of the human semblance. For beyond that terrain, normative assessments fall apart. The difference between these two scenarios is that only within the former does comparability hold. In other words, comparability is a necessary condition of a sound account of meaning in language and ethics.

Berlin speculates about how settled and definitive the boundaries of our conception of the person are, that is, how the semi-permanent web of categories and values can alter over time:

we can ask ourselves to what degree this or that change in them would affect our experience. It is possible, although *ex hypothesi* not easy, to conceive of beings whose fundamental categories of thought or perception radically differ from ours; the greater such differences, the harder it will be for us to communicate with them, or, if the process goes further, to regard them as being human or sentient; or, if the process goes far enough, to conceive of them at all.⁸⁶

He further believes that the question about the adaptability of these categories, as well as the conditions of change, are insufficiently explored empirical questions.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Berlin, ‘The Concept of Scientific History’, p. 135.

⁸⁷ Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, p. xxxii.

Changes, in any case, are liable to happen either as a result of radical upheavals in the empirical world or through dissociation from reality on the part of individuals, that is to say, madness.⁸⁸ In other words, the categories can undergo a change due to an assault from reality, a dramatic change in the empirical world that renders them obsolete. Alternatively, because these categories are internally connected to our ordinary conception of the person, they are in turn useless to evaluate practices that are conceived of as mad.

It may happen, Berlin surmises, that others' practices cease to make sense to us to the extent that one cannot even disagree with their way of acting or pass judgment on their way of living. Members of an alien culture can recognize others' values as part of a project of leading a human life:

if I say of someone that he is kind or cruel, loves truth or is indifferent to it, he remains human in either case. But if I find a man to whom it literally makes no difference whether he kicks a pebble or kills his family, since either would be an antidote to *ennui* or inactivity, I shall not be disposed, like consistent relativists, to attribute to him merely a different code of morality from my own or that of most men, or declare that we disagree on essentials, but shall begin to speak of insanity and inhumanity.⁸⁹

Once again Durkheim comes into view. For Durkheim too claims that 'society cannot abandon these categories to the free will of particular individuals without abandoning itself', and the immersion in these intellectual and moral lenses fends off the pathological cases. 'What happens when a mind openly departs from these norms of all thought?' Durkheim asks. 'Society no longer considers that mind human in the full sense of the word, and treats it accordingly.'⁹⁰ Likewise, Berlin believes that the human semblance marks the frontier of rational communication. More bluntly, beyond the human semblance there is no room for meaningful comparison among statements.

⁸⁸ Berlin, 'Does Political Theory Still Exist?', p. 166.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* Berlin's criteria for settling the boundaries of ethical comprehension are contentious. The idea that there is such a thing as a human semblance that establishes the line between rational and mad behaviour remains vague, and he does not draw clear conclusions from it. At some points he censures the Romantic Movement for taking pathological, violent forms which went too far for human toleration (Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, p. 13). In the same vein, Berlin also condemns some forms of nationalism, the most extreme of which are unspeakable and cannot be squared within his idea of pluralism. He also claims, however, that Nazi values are detestable but not insane. Hence, how pathological a web of actions needs to be to fall outside the province of human understanding remains an open issue; and moreover, the notion of madness itself — its meaning and implications in each different epoch — is an entire disputable issue in itself, which makes it a very poor benchmark to distinguish meaningful from nonsensical communication, for the limits and definition of madness itself need constant vigil. Be that as it may, it is clear that ethical communication can break down, and I want to suggest that these are instances of value incomparability.

⁹⁰ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, p. 19.

Berlin cites the epic of Gilgamesh (as well as the ethical and metaphysical edifice of the Egyptians and the Incas) as an example of an obsolete narrative incapable of describing the portrait of the person as we experience it today. The story of Gilgamesh framed in its half divine and half human terms (among other alien, fantastic and eccentric features) still speaks to us. It opens, in its fantastic fashion, a world of values that remain mostly relevant for us — power, friendship, endurance, shortcoming, angst, victory, achievement and deception. Yet Enkidu, fashioned out of clay by a goddess, is far away from our conception of a person; and Gilgamesh with his immense and unmatched heroic status does not sit any closer to our human and finite condition. The story brings to the surface values that we humans and half-divine, colossal creatures share, and thus still bear moral significance to our contemporary eyes. Yet the agents involved, and the relevant circumstances, have been transfigured so dramatically that normative assessments between them and us cease to be comparable. Humans and Enkidu make not a case of incommensurability but one of incomparability.

When the human semblance crumbles to that extent, when the conception of the person veers so considerably from our own, the comparison of ethical questions comes to a halt. There is no relevant situation in which we could meaningfully ask whether Gilgamesh or oneself is right, for there is nothing consequential to draw from any normative value that could apply to both. The fact that Berlin would point to incomparability as the limit to ethical discussion implies that his value pluralism rests on comparable, and yet incommensurable values. This is important because, as Ruth Chang argues, there is good reason to think that justification of choice depends on the comparability of the alternatives.⁹¹ In Berlin's thought, incommensurability requires comparability. In this regard too Berlin's ethical view is a sequel to his semantics, whereby the inability to translate different forms of propositions into each other — that is, the reaffirmation of their incommensurability — proves the existence of a common language that allows for the comparison and understanding of the statements that one wants to translate.

III Conclusion

The thematic continuity and consistency of Berlin's early and late thought are not without significance even when, as Ryan argues, one could not have foreseen Berlin's subsequent work based only on his early writings. For in addition to bringing to the surface the thematic affinity and sensibility to reductionism and monism across his work, the analysis of the coherence of his whole system of thought illuminates the origins of his later ethical claims.

⁹¹ Ruth Chang, *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reasoning* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), p. 3.

That is, the fact that his views on ethics grow out of his views on meaning carries strong implications for the understanding of his late pluralism in two ways. First, if a continuous thread of anti-reductionism, historicity, anti-metaphysics, conflict, incompleteness and comparability stretches throughout his thought, it means that Berlin's pluralism rests on much wider grounds. Indeed, his pluralism harks back to his early stance on semantic and ontological issues — views which, as this article has argued, colour his ethical position. In other words, Berlin's pluralism is an account of politics and ethics that presupposes a specific account of meaning and social reality. His plural account of ethics and society stands on a view of semantics and metaphysics as well. Second, the archeological exploration of Berlin's work favours a deeply historical version of his pluralism over the moral realist reading of value incommensurability, which provides a more meaningful ground for understanding how liberalism and pluralism reinforce each other in Berlin's political theory.

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